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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000652

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND SCA/RA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [EINV](#) [ECON](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: DAS FEIGENBAUM ENCOURAGES REFORM AND
FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

REF: A. COLOMBO 632

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 496

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. On July 2, SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary Evan Feigenbaum held meetings in Male' with government officials, civil society, the UN, and opposition groups to urge progress on democratic reform and free and fair multi-party elections in coming months. Government officials, including President Gayoom, Deputy Foreign Minister Hameed, and Legal Reform Minister Nasheed were optimistic about election preparations, but openly acknowledged challenges. Civil society and opposition figures expressed deep skepticism about the government's ability to complete election preparations in time for a fall election; the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) doubted the government would hold an election at all. Post expects an election will be held this year, although perhaps not by October 10 and not without some flaws. End Summary.

US-Maldivian Relations Strong and Growing

[1](#)2. (C) In meetings with President Maumoon Gayoom, Deputy Foreign Minister Abdulla Hameed, and Legal Reform Minister Mohamed Nasheed, DAS Feigenbaum welcomed close US-Maldivian cooperation on trade and security and highlighted USG efforts to expand educational opportunities for Maldivians in the United States. He welcomed the establishment of a Maldivian Embassy in Washington and noted US plans to open a American Presence Post in Male. Deputy Foreign Minister Hameed (Gayoom's brother) expressed appreciation for the excellent relations between the US and Maldives. President Gayoom welcomed US plans to open a Presence Post. Gayoom commented that the Daily Life Renewable Energy wind turbine project, which contains significant US export content, has been very successful, anticipating that it will be expanded to other islands. Gayoom also sought US support on climate change, noting his effort to promote climate action in the Commonwealth, as well as UN agencies.

[1](#)3. (C) Hameed asked for assistance in combating Maldives' growing drug problem, noting that 1 in 4 Maldivians is a heroin addict. He said Maldives has only one rehabilitation center that can assist just 100 patients at a time. He added that the risk of HIV/AIDS is growing as Maldivian drug users

shift toward intravenous use. Gayoom echoed Hameed's request for increased US assistance in tackling the drug problem.

Gayoom Anticipates Elections During Ramadan

14. (C) In meetings with GORM officials, DAS Feigenbaum emphasized the importance of continuing the current reform process and of ensuring that the upcoming presidential election is free and fair. He stressed the importance of establishing independent institutions in time for them to oversee the election process. Deputy Foreign Minister Hameed acknowledged the short timeline for preparing for elections, but said the President planned to quickly ratify the constitution, passed June 26. He said the GORM intended to hold elections before the October 10 deadline specified in the new constitution; he claimed both government and opposition were working together closely, but quietly, to meet the deadline. Hameed said that a provision in the new constitution allows the President to postpone elections for one year; this would allow more time to prepare but, he noted, the President is extremely reluctant to postpone. He added that international and domestic observers would be welcome during the election. Minister for Legal Reform and Information Mohamed Nasheed reported good progress on drafting the implementing legislation needed before the election, noting that his ministry had hired American and Canadian consultants on media reform, constitutional issues, and to bolster the election commission.

15. (C) President Gayoom noted that in 4 years the

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government has achieved much progress on reform, including establishing a Human Rights Commission, allowing free media, legalizing political parties, reforming the criminal justice system and completing a new constitution. He said he was reviewing the draft that was passed in late June and would sign it within the next 2 to 3 weeks. He said the election will be held before October 10, adding that it will likely have to be held during Ramadan in September. He acknowledged that the public would not be pleased with a Ramadan election, but said he did not want to invoke the constitution's postponement provision because it would call into question his intentions on reform. Gayoom welcomed both international and domestic monitors.

UN and Civil Society Skeptical About Elections

16. (SBU) Local NGO Transparency Maldives (TM) highlighted the lack of public confidence in the reform process and the electoral system, and assessed that the public will not perceive the election as free and fair. TM said the public has not been educated about the new multi-party system, and that most youth are unaware of and apathetic about the reform process. Public education was part of the Roadmap for Reform, they said, but has not been implemented. The GORM is waiting for an EU expert to arrive and assist with voter education. TM plans to train local civil society groups to monitor the election on the outer islands and will establish an online complaints database with SMS capability so that observers can report any problems. TM expressed concern that a Ramadan election would give the government a campaign advantage because of its role in religion in Maldives.

17. (C) UN Resident Representative Patrice Coeur-Bizot said that the UN is not providing technical assistance at this stage and has no plans to monitor the election. The UN had privately informed Gayoom it was prepared, if asked to do so, to send a small mission to observe the election and make technical recommendations for future elections. Coeur-Bizot noted that a free and fair election is unlikely given the short timeline to prepare; the UN is unwilling to be more formally associated with the process.

Concern Over Rising Extremism

¶8. (C) Deputy Minister Hameed expressed concern about rising religious extremism in Maldives, attributing the rise to returned Maldivians educated in Pakistani madrassas. New Maldives former ministers Ahmed Shaheed and Hassan Saeed attributed growing conservatism in Maldives to several causes, including more Maldivians traveling to Haj each year. They said that many women began wearing head scarves after 9/11 when the perception was that Islam around the world was under attack. They added that drug addicts often turn to religion for help since the government has few resources to assist addicts. Shaheed and Saeed noted that head scarves and beards are also seen as a sign of opposition to the government, which has often shaved the faces of detainees, and have become more popular as frustration with Gayoom has grown. At the same time, Gayoom's use of religion as a political tool has contributed to religious conservatism.

MDP Predicts Unfair or No Election;
Feels "Betrayed" by International Community

¶9. (C) MDP leaders Mohamed Nasheed (Anni), Mariya Didi, Ibrahim Zaki and Hassan Afeef displayed intense skepticism about the reform process and election preparations. An emotional MDP presidential candidate, Anni, told DAS Feigenbaum that the problem is not lack of time to prepare for elections, but rather Gayoom's lack of intent to have a multi-party election. When Feigenbaum reported that Gayoom had just told him there would be an election in coming months, Anni predicted there would be no election whatsoever. MDP leaders agreed with one another that Gayoom was likely to postpone the election by at least a year. Anni complained

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that he may be disqualified from contesting because of past criminal charges, which he says were politically motivated. The MDP reported a recent increase in political detentions; many MDP supporters, they said, have pending charges for which they could be detained at any time. Currently, 20 MDP party workers are in detention and over 700 have pending charges against them. Despite these difficulties, the MDP predicted that most political parties would field their own candidates for the first round of elections, and would then rally behind the most successful opposition candidate for the runoff.

¶10. (C) MDP leaders expressed concern that the international community's election observation plans would be inadequate. Anni complained that no professionally dedicated organizations plan to observe the election and predicted that the EU organized mission would be too small to have much of an impact. He noted that the MDP feels "let down by the international community," and he accused the international community of failing to push the GORM for a free and fair election; DAS Feigenbaum took issue with this, noting his own meeting with Gayoom and ongoing efforts by Embassy Colombo and others.

New Maldives Group Confident of Broad Electoral Support

¶11. (C) Former Gayoom ministers Ahmed Shaheed and Hassan Saeed, now leading the independent New Maldives movement, told DAS Feigenbaum that President Gayoom was likely to ratify the constitution and hold elections, but agreed with Feigenbaum that Gayoom would seek to "stack the deck" in his favor by using resources at his disposal, including choosing the timing of the election. They said electoral cooperation between New Maldives and the MDP was unlikely at this point, in part because of the antagonistic relationship between the Government and the MDP. They said the MDP fears that the progress on reform is reversible, while the government fears the MDP will cause chaos in Maldives and try to punish

Gayoom's administration if they come into power. The MDP prefers to challenge Gayoom through street action and rhetoric rather than developing a national party organization or alternative policies. Shaheed added that the MDP is experiencing an internal crisis; the party has been reduced to a small core of Anni's own supporters. Several MDP heavyweights had recently split off from the MDP to form the Republican Party. In April, MDP President Munavvar split off from the MDP after failing to get the party's nomination as the MDP presidential candidate; Shaheed expected Munavvar and his supporters to soon join the Republican Party. These splits have left Anni's MDP in a difficult position going into the election. Shaheed acknowledged, however, that the "grassroots" still support Anni and he has considerable support in the South.

¶12. (C) Shaheed and Saeed stressed the importance of access to state media for all candidates. With only a matter of weeks to campaign, it will be impossible for any candidate to reach every island. Access to State media, particularly television, will give the candidates a chance to be heard. A recently signed agreement between the opposition parties and the government on media access excludes independent candidates such as Saeed.

¶13. (C) Shaheed and Saeed said they have no plans to start a political party. Saeed noted that only 30 percent of Maldivians belong to any political party, and that New Maldives has support from across the political spectrum. Shaheed said that recent polling showed that Gayoom would not get the 51 percent of the vote needed to prevent a runoff. A recent MDP poll predicted Gayoom would get 40 percent of the vote, Saeed would get 30 percent, and the MDP would get only 15 percent. These polls have shown increasing support for Saeed over the past six months. Saeed's strategy, he said, is to conduct one-on-one conversations with primary decision-makers in each community. Once he wins them over, their supporters will follow. Taking a swipe at the MDP's daily rallies in a Male' park, Saeed said he preferred these

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meetings and a door-to-door approach over rallies, noting that "being noisy" will only turn away moderates and attract attention from the government.

¶14. (C) Saeed added that he expects the Islamic Adhaalath Party to endorse his candidacy. He and Shaheed stressed the importance of bringing Adhaalath into mainstream politics, noting that the party manifesto is "not as fundamentalist as people think." Saeed said the Adhaalath Party is made up of teachers and mullahs that are concerned about the "erosion" of Islam in Maldives. If those issues are not discussed, he said, some groups will become more extreme.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: The stories presented by the government and MDP are starkly contradictory, but the government's story, at least at this point, appears more credible. Shaheed's assessment that an election will occur, but with Gayoom doing everything possible to assure his own advantage, is probably accurate. We will continue to encourage the government to ensure a free and fair election, including through international and domestic monitoring, and to encourage the opposition to constructively engage in the reform process.

BLAKE